



“Awesome Conference”

Recapping 2018’s The Summit: Georgia’s Child Welfare Conference

With more than 500 attendees, Georgia’s 2nd Annual Child Welfare Conference: “The Summit” was held December 3-5, 2018 in Atlanta. The Office of the Child Advocate was pleased to once again partner with the Administrative Office of the Courts and the Division of Family and Children Services for this year’s statewide conference.

This event aims to bring together all disciplines involved in Georgia’s child protection and child welfare system for a time of education, collaboration, and networking. Recognizing that each of us has an important role in the lives of Georgia’s children, one of the goals of this conference is to encourage and inspire continuous improvements impacting the lives of the children and families we serve .

With feedback like “awesome conference”, “tons of useful information delivered by knowledgeable people”, and “got some good ideas and made connections”, the aims and goals were realized.

Jerry Bruce was the first of the 2018 Summit’s three plenary speakers. He challenged attendees to evaluate their views on permanency with



Jerry Bruce delivering the opening keynote at The Summit

the opening keynote: “Terminacy: Rethinking Permanency”. Jaap Doek, an international child protection and child welfare expert, shared some global insights and perspectives from his work with many countries, as well as with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). As Georgia does, the CRC also recognizes that a child’s

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Georgia Supreme Court Justice David E. Nahmias welcoming attendees and introducing the closing keynote speaker, Giovan Bazan

OCA’s monthly platform for the unedited voices of young people who have been in care....

Youth Voice

By Shianne Davis

I, Shianne, am a former foster care youth that is the age of 19; that is driven to help others in the child welfare system have a better life than I did. In order to do this, I am a part of an initiative in Iowa that is focusing on increasing better outcomes for African American youth that are in the child welfare system. I use my experience from being in the system to spread light onto what is really going on for children like me.

I entered the welfare system at the age of 14 for mental health and behavioral issues. My mother could no longer handle my actions and behaviors while trying to provide for three younger children. I was first placed

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DFCS' Secret Santa Program Helps Fulfill Holiday Wishes for Children in Foster Care



Each year, in coordination with Clark Howard, DFCS organizes the delivery of presents to many children in foster care through the Secret Santa Program.

Of this year's event, Donna Pettigrew-Jackson, Secret Santa's Program Organizer for DFCS, said, "Due to the generosity and kindness of Georgians across the state, over 10,000 children in foster care in Georgia woke up to presents on Christmas morning. This year's drive was the largest collection of gifts in the program's 28-year history. We are grateful for the hope given to Georgia's most vulnerable children."



For those children in foster care that do not receive gifts via the Secret Santa Program, there are many other people and organizations that ensure those children also receive gifts during the holiday season.

Thank you to all the people that contributed to this and similar efforts — either with their time, money, or both!



Upcoming Events:

- ✓ MAAC Day at the Capitol, January 17, 2019, Atlanta, GA.
- ✓ 2019 Strolling Thunder: A Storm of Advocacy for Infants and Toddlers, January 20, 2019, Atlanta, GA. More info [here](#).
- ✓ Mental Health Day at the Capitol, February 8, 2019, Atlanta, GA. More info [here](#).
- ✓ Deadline to submit a nomination for the Chief Justice Hines 2019 Awards for an Attorney and a Case Manager of the Year, February 28, 2019. More info [here](#).

*Mark your
calendar!*



Spotlight on The Summit



“Holden On”

Holden On, the story of a young man afflicted by mental illness and suicide, was shown during an optional movie night. This important film portrays the complexity of mental illness and suicide in teens, offers insight to prevention, and opens the door to conversation about this difficult but critical community concern. Tamlin Hall, the screenwriter and director of the movie, and Mike Angstadt, who knows Holden’s family personally, hosted a discussion following the screening of this film.



Book Drive

During The Summit, we hosted a book drive for children in foster care. Attendees came through, having donated over 200 books for children of all ages.

Juvenile Court Judge Lisa Jones has already packed up a suitcase full of books to distribute to children throughout the Southwestern Judicial Circuit. The remaining books will be distributed to DFCS offices and juvenile courts to ensure they make their way into the hands of a child in foster care.

Books bring education and knowledge, fun and relaxation, and comfort. Our hope is that these books will do exactly that for children in foster care needing any or all of those things.



Professional Breakouts

Attendees had an opportunity to gather with others in their profession to connect and discuss unique aspects of their roles. Professional categories included Case Managers and Supervisors, DFCS State Office or Field Operations, All Attorneys, CASA, and Judges. As The Summit continues, we expect to expand the opportunities for these professional breakouts.



Brain Breaks

Each breakout session offered a “Brain Break”- a session designed as an alternative to a more traditional presentation. Options included speed networking; a “Family Feud” style game with a child welfare spin (highly competitive!); an experiential “walk” in a young person’s shoes as they pursue their postsecondary education; self-care techniques; and creating an item for a child in foster care.





We're listening!

During The Summit, attendees had the opportunity to submit their "wishes" or ideas for improvements to the system in a "wishing well" (aka a child's suitcase that was later donated to a child in foster care). A sampling of them here:

- * "For the Summit conference – Don't ignore the providers :) We are here! However most of the introductions, breakouts, and workshops have left us out. We are with your/our kids & families weekly, if not more, and often the most consistent person in their lives as they change placements & CMs. We are part (a big part) of your team!" *Note from the planners: Please accept our apologies as this was certainly not our intention. We will strive to be more inclusive next year. Thank you for all you do!*
- * "Remind state office staff, units, specialists, etc., etc. (contract unit, OPM, well-being spec., training unit, record reviewers, accounting, HR) that their job is to support the field – not direct and generate work of the field."
- * "Ethics Professionalism credit would be wonderful" *Note from the planners: Agreed! We will do our best to have these available next year.*
- * "Foster families for the whole family"
- * "Parent advocate program"
- * "Our DFCS case workers need more training re policy, engaging parents, and how to provide effective case management. Please ask your case workers anonymously what they need. I get told by DFCS case workers that they feel they are thrown into the field w/out enough training."



The Work

A poem by DFCS case manager, Chelsea Brooks

You will be the one they blame when they're too overcome shame
 You will be the one they blame when things are frustrating
 when people are hurting
 Some will never appreciate you, others will never understand. But
 that doesn't really matter
 Regardless of what they yell at you, regardless of what they say
 You are there for that one person, that one child that you made
 smile
 You are there for the one who has a better life
 You are there to give that one a better life with no pain
 People may discourage you
 Make you feel like you do no right
 But remind yourself it is for one life changed that you fight
 You brush off the words
 Sleep off those long days
 And advocate for the people who need to see change
 It won't be easy
 And results can seem impossible
 But you were chosen for this



Where's Waldo?

See if you can spot any familiar faces in these scenes from The Summit!





The Summit, continued...

As such, Professor Doek highlighted, “Judges have a certain level of accountability to understand and consider the child’s views and should explain to the child what weight he or she has given to the child’s views and why.”

“In the decision, the judge should explain what kind of weight was given and why, preferably using child friendly language...A lot of research has shown that the acceptability of a decision very much depends on the degree to which parents and child were heard along with the explanation of the decision.”

- Jaap Doek

views should be given due weight throughout dependency proceedings.

views and should explain to the child what weight he or she has given to the child’s views and why.”

For the final plenary session, Giovan Bazan shared his story of time spent in foster care and the resulting effects of that. In doing so, he underscored the importance of mental health care. He also left us with a little inspiration and motivation to continue striving for improvements for the children and families we serve.



DFCS Interim Director Tom Rawlings welcoming Professor Jaap Doek

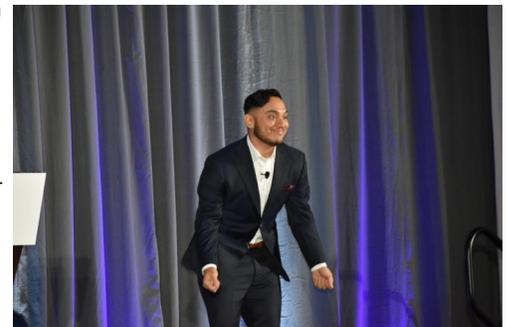
The workshops were centered around multi-system, community-based approaches to protecting children and supporting families. Offerings included a wide range of topics, such as: case law updates; permanent guardianships; engaging African American fathers; the intersection of child welfare and domestic violence; evidentiary issues; a parent’s perspective; trauma-informed systems of care; and implicit bias. In addition to the workshops, “brain breaks” — alternatives to traditional workshops designed to encourage more networking and cultivate habits that contribute to our mental and physical health and resilience — were also offered. (See [page 3](#) for more about these.)

Attendees encountered multiple options to promote their own self-care, as well as have a little fun. Indeed, some attendees shared their feedback that the “brain break” sessions were “interactive” and “fun”, contained “feel good” moments, and left them with a “deeper understanding” and additional “insight”. The giant word search also provided an opportunity for fun, while early morning meditation yoga offered an opportunity for self care.

Another highlight of The Summit were videos showcasing a variety of positive outcomes. One story focused on the support a young lady received as she aged out of care and pursued her college degree. Another story shared the impact that Family Treatment Courts can have. Yet another story celebrated a father’s success at reunifying with his children. A juvenile court judge shared a bit of her motivation for this work. The final video featured a young girl who experienced a significant amount of trauma but was ultimately adopted and continues to maintain contact with her biological parents. In the event you missed any or all of these videos, they can be found [here](#).



All of this plus more was packed into these few amazing days. Many thanks to the exhibitors, presenters, attendees and others who made this event a success! Your feedback is extremely helpful as we look forward to The Summit again in 2019 where we hope to join with each of you yet again to elevate our collective work for the children and families of Georgia. Until then, thank you for participating and thank you for all the hard work you do every day to help improve outcomes within the child welfare system.



Giovan Bazan leading the audience in some silly moves without explanation as a way to demonstrate how children in foster care often feel



**#THEWEDNESDAYWHY:
WHY ASK WHY?**

"Why?" is an extremely important question. Child welfare professionals need to understand the root causes behind the issues and behaviors they encounter to be able to properly address and respond to them.

So please always ask "Why?"

Why is this parent struggling with her case plan?

Why did this child run away?

Why is this child not succeeding in school?

Why is this child "acting out"?

Why is the parent having a hard time with transportation?

Why can these siblings not be placed together?

Why can this child not return home safely today?

Child Abuse Protocol Mini-Summit

On December 3, 2018, a mini-summit was held to discuss ideas for improvements to Georgia's Model Child Abuse Protocol. Participants developed many creative ideas, which are in the process of being implemented in a soon-to-be revised version of the Child Abuse Protocol. Once complete, it will be available on OCA's website. In the meantime, the current version is available [here](#).



Attendees at the mini-summit discuss ideas for improvements to the state's Model Child Abuse Protocol

Voice, cont'd...

in a PMIC (Psychiatric Medical Institutes for Children) residential facility

in Des Moines, Iowa. After seeing the counselor, I was diagnosed with several severe mental health disorders. Soon these diagnoses were used as labels to describe me more than my actions did. Running away or doing any "bad" behavior will get you labeled as well. These labels do not only affect what you are able to do in treatment, but where you can go for other treatments if needed. Being labeled a high-risk runner (meaning you ran away from treatment multiple times) significantly restricts what other treatments are willing to take you because you are a risk to their facility. The adults in the treatment facilities do not care why you ran, but just the fact that you ran. I ran to get away from constant bullying, but that didn't matter. Staff couldn't get the bullying to stop so I took matters into my own hands and ran away.

From my experience I want to encourage three different things. The first is to not let labels define the children in the system because behaviors or diagnoses are not who the child is. Secondly, allow youth in treatment more freedoms for them to feel more like a "normal" teenager (this is an issue even though I didn't cover it in this paper). Lastly, look at the root causes for the behavior and address them before adding diagnoses and acting like the children will never be successful in life.

Editor's Note: Shianne is a young lady involved with work through the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative. She understands the importance of "asking the why" for all youth in foster care and hopes to convey it to the professionals working with the youth.

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